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## Serpico on Serpico



Librado Romero/The New York Times

**PAINFUL MEMORIES** Frank Serpico, whose 1971 testimony on police corruption made him a pariah.

By **COREY KILGANNON**  
Published: January 22, 2010

HARLEMVILLE, N.Y. — He looked like some sort of fur trapper, this bearded man walking through the snowy woods here in upstate New York. But then, Frank Serpico has always been known for his disguises.

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Frank Serpico testifying before the Knapp Commission.

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Anyone who has seen the celebrated 1973 film "[Serpico](#)" knows that he often dressed up — bum, butcher, rabbi — to catch criminals. His off-duty look was never vintage cop either, with the bushy beard and the beads.

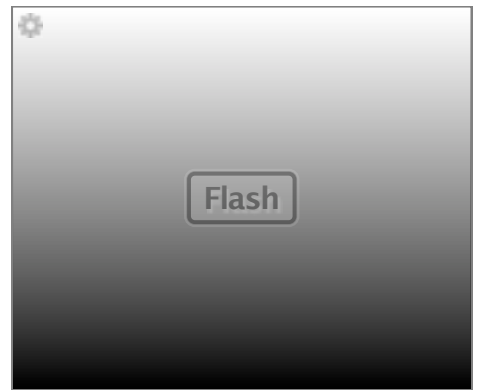
This is the man whose long and loud complaining about widespread corruption in the New York Police Department made him a pariah on the force. The patrolman shot in the face during a 1971 drug bust while screaming for backup from his fellow officers, who then failed to immediately call for an ambulance. The undaunted whistle-blower whose testimony was the centerpiece of the Knapp Commission hearings, which sparked the biggest shakeup in the history of the department.

Four decades later, Frank Serpico is still bearded,

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Al Pacino in "Serpico."

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Librado Romero/The New York Times  
**A SIMPLE LIFE** Frank Serpico, former police officer, lives in a one-room cabin. No TV or Internet. "This is my life now," he said. "The woods, nature, solitude."

handsome and a flamboyant dresser. At 73, he seems spry enough to chase down and collar a perp; on that wintry walk through the woods, he interrogated a man carrying a sled, and followed a trail of blood drops in the snow until it disappeared. Not long before, he had sniffed out a dumper of garbage on his property and reported him to the police.

Mr. Serpico still carries the detective shield he was awarded as he left the department on a disability pension and, often, his licensed revolver, with which he takes target practice on his 50-acre property not far from this Columbia County hamlet. He also still carries bullet fragments lodged just below his brain from the drug shooting; he is deaf in his left ear, and has nerve damage in his left leg.

For many, "Serpico" conjures the face of [Al Pacino](#), who won his first Golden Globe award for his star turn in the film. The movie — along with news reports and the best-selling biography of the same name — seared the public memory with painful images: of the honest cop bleeding in a squad car rushing to the hospital, where, over months of rehabilitation, he received cards telling him to rot in hell. Instead, Mr. Serpico took his fluffy sheepdog, Alfie, and boarded a ship to Europe; the film's closing credits describe him as "now living somewhere in Switzerland."

Which was true at the time. After years traveling abroad, Mr. Serpico returned to the United States around 1980 and lived as a nomad, out of a camper. He finally settled about two hours north of New York City, where he lives a monastic life in a one-room cabin he built in the woods near the Hudson River. In 1997, he spoke out after the brutal beatings of [Abner Louima](#) in a Brooklyn station house, but mostly he stays far from his old nemesis.

Now, all these years later, Mr. Serpico is working on his own version of the harrowing adventures chronicled by [Peter Maas's](#) biography, which sold more than three million copies (royalties from the book and the movie have helped him live comfortably without working). The memoir begins

with the same awful scene as the film: Serpico shot in the face during a heroin bust on Driggs Avenue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, Feb. 3, 1971. Working title: "Before I Go."

"It's the rest of the story," he said recently over lunch in the self-service cafe of a health-food store here in Harlemville. "It's more personal. I used to think, 'How can I write my life story? I'm still living it.'" Though he is healthy, he added, "I'm getting close to the line, so I figure I better get busy."

It is, ultimately, a story of healing. He wandered in Europe and across North America, he said, because "I wanted to find my life."

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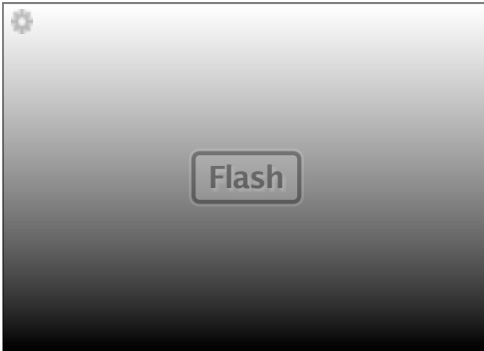
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NYREGION

#### Watching 'Serpico' With Serpico

Four decades after getting shot in a drug bust and testifying against police corruption, retired Detective Frank Serpico is living in upstate New York and still trying to heal.

“I had gone through a near-death experience,” he explained, “and that gives you an insight into how fleeting life is, and what’s important.”

After he settled here, his journey turned inward. He eschewed what he sees as an ugly American addiction to consumerism and media brainwashing. He eats mostly [vegetarian](#) and [organic food](#), cooking on the wood-burning stove that heats the cabin, where there is neither television nor the Internet. “This is my life now,” he said. “The woods, nature, solitude.”

Mr. Serpico relies on Chinese medicine, herbs and shiatsu. He practices meditation, the Japanese Zen flute and African drumming, and dance: ballroom, tango, swing. He takes long walks at sunrise and rescues wounded animals. He raises chickens and guinea hens. He has a girlfriend: she is French, a schoolteacher, age 50.

None of which has exorcised the demons of being Serpico.

“I still have nightmares,” he said. “I open a door a little bit and it just explodes in my face. Or I’m in a jam and I call the police, and guess who shows up? My old cop buddies who hated me.”

•

Growing up the son of Italian immigrants in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, young Frank revered the local cops. He loved detective stories on the radio and dreamed of wearing the uniform. He had also cultivated a bit of worldliness from visiting Italy as a child and traveling abroad with the Army after enlisting at age 18. He joined the New York Police Department in 1959 and passionately pursued big game.

His partners and bosses resented his hippie looks and his zealousness to make arrests even while off-duty or on the turf of other officers. His intrigues with the ballet and opera rubbed against the conservative culture of the station house. He lived a bohemian life, with a small garden apartment on Perry Street in the West Village, where he was known as Paco and hid his police badge.

The street-savvy but idealistic Officer Serpico was appalled at the cliquishness and the payoffs — free meals as well as big, blatant bribes — from criminals, gamblers, numbers men and ordinary merchants whom he saw as a beat cop in Brooklyn’s 81st Precinct and later while working vice and racketeering. He refused to accept such grease, and became despised for it both inside and outside the department.

In 1967, Mr. Serpico began telling what he knew to high-ranking officials at police headquarters and City Hall. He presented names, places, dates and other information, but no action was taken. Frustrated, he and a friend on the force, David Durk, a graduate of [Amherst College](#) who had become an officer in 1963 after quitting law school, contacted a reporter for The New York Times.

The front-page story by David Burnham on April 25, 1970, pressured Mayor [John V. Lindsay](#) to form the Knapp Commission, before which Mr. Serpico testified that “the atmosphere does not yet exist in which an honest police officer can act without fear of ridicule or reprisal from fellow officers.”

The commission carried out the most extensive investigation of police wrongdoing in the city’s history and exposed a pattern of entrenched corruption and cover-up that helped usher in reform.

“It was terrifying in those days — they were really sticking their necks out,” recalled Mr. Burnham, who now works at a data-gathering and research firm. “We really shamed the city, and things really changed.”

Mr. Serpico does not exactly agree. He believes the department still does not acknowledge its internal problems because the leadership’s top priority is to avoid scandal.

“I hear from police officers all the time; they contact me,” he said. “An honest cop still can’t find a place to go and complain without fear of recrimination. The blue wall will always be there because the system supports it.”

Paul J. Browne, the chief police spokesman, dismissed Mr. Serpico’s indictment by saying, “It’s a very different department now.”

“Things have changed vastly,” Mr. Browne said, “and he is literally old enough to be the grandfather of some police officers now on duty.”

Mr. Serpico avoids the city now, but there is a part of him that has never left its station houses. Several years ago, he showed up at [John Jay College of Criminal Justice](#) in Manhattan to confront Patrick V. Murphy, the police commissioner at the time of the shooting, who was in the audience. “I’ve been carrying a bullet around in my head for 35 years and I hold you responsible,” Mr. Serpico recalled telling Mr. Murphy, who did not respond.

Michael Bosak, a 27-year veteran of the Police Department who has served as its informal historian since retiring in 1995, said that for a time he kept in touch with Mr. Serpico by e-mail, and that his messages tended to be long diatribes on various topics, seemingly unaffected by the passage of decades. “The [N.Y.P.D.](#) is a thousand times more honest than it was 40 years ago,” Mr. Bosak said. “I think he’s still in a lot of pain. Going through what he went through, it can drive you off your rocker.”

Indeed, Mr. Serpico still brims with bitterness that he was made third-grade detective, rather than the top tier of first-grade; that the department’s museum in Lower Manhattan declined his offer of his uniform and his service revolver; that its leadership never asks him to speak about corruption or reform. The Medal of Honor he was awarded — the department’s highest commendation — remains tossed “in some drawer.”

“They never even had a ceremony for me,” he said of the honorary promotion. “They handed it to me over the counter with the Medal of Honor, like a pack of cigarettes.

“The department never recognized me for standing up for what’s right,” he added, “because I violated the omertà; I spoke out.”

•

During his years in Europe, Mr. Serpico bought a farm in the Netherlands and married a Dutch woman with two young children. But after the woman died of cancer, her parents took custody of the children and Mr. Serpico sold the farm and moved back to the United States. He wandered the continent from Mexico to Canada in his camper.

In 1980, a lover had a son and brought a paternity suit. He claimed to have been “deceived and entrapped” by the woman, and then waged a lengthy and unsuccessful court fight to avoid child-support payments. He did not raise the son, Alex Serpico, and has had limited contact with him in recent years.

Mr. Serpico refused to reveal the exact location of his current home. Instead, he was interviewed in various coffee shops and restaurants where he is a regular in a few small villages north of Hudson, N.Y., just off the Taconic State Parkway. He is known to the locals as Paco, his off-duty nickname in the Village in the late 1960s.

At lunches in the Harlemville health-food store, Mr. Serpico slipped a bottle of red wine out of his bag and poured it into paper cups. Afterward, cigars.

True to his cinematic self, he always showed up in a different outfit and hat: one day as the shepherd, the next day the prospector, then the monk. He wears an earring in each ear and a magnifying glass around his neck for fine print. He would spout esoterica and draw from his knowledge of Italian, Spanish, German, Dutch, Arabic and Russian. In a coffee shop, he might quote from Dante’s “Inferno,” or pull out his harmonica and

play “Danny Boy.”

Mr. Serpico said he had played, in local productions, the Arab in Saroyan’s “The Time of Your Life,” Gonzalo in “The Tempest,” a detective in “Ten Little Indians” and Johann Most in Howard Zinn’s “Emma.”

“My acting career began on the streets of New York,” he said. “When I was a cop, I played many impressive roles, from derelict to a doctor, and my life often depended on my performance.”

Back then, as he became suspect among fellow officers, Mr. Serpico began spreading the word that he was writing a book, but only as a bluff. “I said, ‘I’m going to name names, and if anything happens to me, I got it all written down right there,’ ” he recalled. “But I never really wrote anything.”

After several frustrating attempts at collaboration with co-writers — “They just don’t get it,” he said — Mr. Serpico enrolled in a weekly workshop through an arts group in Troy, N.Y., where his classmates also do not always understand his stories. “How could they?” he said. “We have women in the class writing about their kids — they don’t know what a bag man is.”

Frank Serpico writes out the story of his life daily in longhand, at the cabin, then types the pages on a computer at the public library, using the two-finger method he honed filing arrest reports on station house typewriters, gathering the pages in a manila folder. The memoir begins on the night of the Williamsburg drug bust, his bleeding body cradled by an elderly tenant who called for assistance when his fellow officers did not, the narrator floating above and recounting the life path that led him there.

It is not unlike the opening scene of the film. He said he had never seen the full movie, but agreed to watch it with me — on my laptop, propped on a windowsill at the public library in Kinderhook, N.Y. As Pacino, near death, was rushed to Greenpoint Hospital, the real Mr. Serpico stared out the window, unable to watch — too painful, he said.

He provided a running commentary: His own wardrobe was much better than in the film, as were his police disguises. The scene in which the police commissioner hands him a gold detective shield in the hospital bed was conjured; in reality, he picked it up from a clerk at police headquarters.

Afterward, Mr. Serpico seemed spent. He looked out at the snow and trees graying in the descending darkness.

“They took the job I loved most,” he said. “I just wanted to be a cop, and they took it away from me.”

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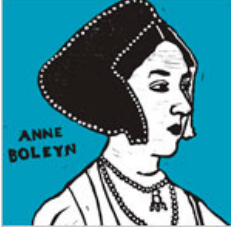
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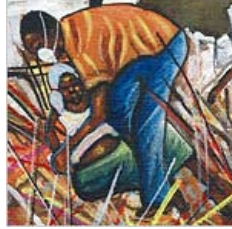
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